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Pinching a Shadow

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Brass Art

The Non-existence of the Unnamed
Pinching a Shadow : Patricia Allmer

On entering Brass Art's exhibition, The Non-existence of the Unnamed, it takes a little while to adjust to the surroundings - a bare, single 40-watt bulb offers the only source of light. Its strength hurts the eye when looking directly into it; when looking away from it, the eye's adjustment to the different levels of shade and darkness blurs vision.

The artworks on the walls, selected by Brass Art from their watercolour series entitled The Myth of Origins, show silhouettes of heads, outlines of the artists' own shadows, of their hands and arms, and of strange creatures, immersed in curious interactions with and explorations of each other. The strange creatures are represented by shadows of different creepy-crawlies - such as a ladybird, a woodlouse, a scorpion, a stick insect - apparently preserved, taken from Manchester Museum's entomology collection. These creatures' shadows appear animated, sometimes growing out of proportion, transforming into gigantic beasts, other times merging with the silhouettes of the artists into monstrous beings.

The solid, dark grey walls and the darkened, hermetic space of the exhibition, with its spare light source, are reminiscent of a cellar, an archive, or, perhaps of a cave, such as the Lascaux caves in France where the walls, just like those in the exhibition, feature rudimentary outlines of animals and people, and where the flickering light of neolithic hearths would have animated these dark figures - pointers to an origin of art - would have enlarged or shrunk them, distorting them like shadows on a wall.

Caves, archives, cellars: we are already led in this exhibition into an underworld, a shadow-world, whose solid walls begin to relax into flexibility through the play between light and painted silhouettes, which ever-so-slightly seem to move, shift, shape-shift, not least through the interference, through the doubling of these captured shadows, from actual ones, our own. Leading us into these shadowlands, the exhibition space becomes a complex engagement, a tracing, an outlining, an intertwining of different myths of origination, presence and preservation.

The Graspable

Flickering and flitting, the philosophical implications and propositions in The Non-existence of the Unnamed behave like shadows, emerge, sometimes prominently, draw back at other points, to mix and mingle, to form hybrids with each other in playful ways. The evocation of prehistoric cave paintings, which are regarded as possible origins of painting (of course, the entomological collection is also about tracing origins), suddenly turns into Plato's cave, the myth of the origins of cognition, of knowledge. Even the painful light of the bulb is reminiscent of Plato's description of the cave; and so is the exhibition's title, which recalls the cave's prisoners who can only name the shadows but not the real objects that cast them. This confirms the entomology curator's assertion from which this title is taken: that if a specimen is not labelled with the place and date of discovery, i.e. named, it does not exist.

The Ungraspable

The Non-existence of the Unnamed traces the lines of origin further. Whilst the exhibition has already evoked mythic sources of the origins of art and knowledge, here these myths morph into another mythic instant of art's origination. The silhouettes drawn by the artists of each other evoke the myth of the origin of the art of painting, as narrated by Pliny the Elder. In this narrative a Corinthian potter's daughter "being in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp." The art of painting, according to Pliny, originated then in "tracing lines round the human shadow,"¹ a myth alluded to by a long tradition of paintings throughout the history of Western art, all of which are titled The Origin of Painting, a lineage continued and reflected upon by Brass Art's The Myth of Origins series. This myth doubles and triples to become also an originary moment for sculpture (in another version of Pliny's tale a potter forms a head from the outline), and for cinema; according to Peter Greenaway:

"a young woman of Corinth, anxious about the departure of her lover, traces the silhouette of his shadow on a

wall as a remembrance of his true likeness. A shadow on a wall. A true likeness. The fixing of shadows. A remembrance.

Perhaps there could not be a more suitable iconography to begin the history of cinema as well as the history of painting.”²

Hands

In *The Myth of Origins* the silhouettes of hands, whose identities remain shady and anonymous, continuously manipulate, cradle, touch, mime, place and pinch (recalling the need ‘to pinch oneself’ in order to awake from a dream, or from reality), as if to compensate for the shadow’s inability to produce facial expression, and echoing the old-fashioned game of shadow-plays. Grasping, or rather the inability to grasp, is here questioned and explored, proposing, perhaps an aesthetic of the negative, which turns to absence and negation (as the title of the exhibition suggests). Here, in Martin Heidegger’s words, the “nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally [my emphasis] belongs to their essential unfolding as such”.³

Fundamental Western myths about cognition, art and love, all of which are based on ‘making present’ and on ‘asserting existence’ - grasping a concept/reality, re-presentation, remembering - are here revealed to be based on the shadow, on a visual aesthetic of pure absence. Like our own existence, the guarantee of which is precisely that which is absent, namely the shadow (plenty of narratives and folktales evoke the fate of the ones whose shadows have been lost, traded or stolen), these myths are always already built on the ungraspable - on the impossibility of fixing a shadow.

Patricia Allmer is Research Fellow at the Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art & Design (MIRIAD) at Manchester

Metropolitan University. She is the author of *René Magritte: Beyond Painting* (Manchester University Press, 2009), and curator of *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009).

Commissioned to accompany Brass Art’s solo exhibition, ‘The Non-existence of the Unnamed’ at the International 3, 13th February – 20th March 2010.

¹ Pliny (the Elder), *The Natural History* of Pliny, Book XXXV, translated by John Bostock and H. T. Riley, p. 228.

² Peter Greenaway, *The Stairs* (London, 1994), p. 43.

³ Martin Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 104.



'The Myth of Origins- The Unnamed no.1'

Brass Art

2009

Watercolour on paper

50cm x 40cm

the artist and The International 3

Title

Artist

Date

Medium

Dimensions

Courtesy